

# THE RHETORIC OF HISTORICAL MOVEMENTS

Leland M. Griffin

WHEN the student undertakes the rhetorical pursuit of an individual orator, he enters a scholarly bailiwick whose boundaries are clearly demarked. Convenient temporal limits for the study are set by the orator's vital dates; the speaker himself supplies the point of focus, the thread of his life a motif, and his career, analyzed and evaluated in all its ramifications from "early speech training" to climactic utterances, provides the matter of the study. Techniques of analysis and appraisal in the biographical approach have become conventionalized, and the central problem for those concerned with research in this area, for the moment at least, would appear to be one of objective rather than of method. Many useful biographical studies have been produced, many more will be, and a fund of information about orators will eventually be accumulated.

Nevertheless, the belief has taken increasing hold that approaches to the study of public address other than the biographical ought to be encouraged. The recommendation has been made,<sup>1</sup> for example, that we pay somewhat less attention to the single speaker and more to speakers—that we turn our attention from the individual "great orator" and undertake research into such selected acts and atmospheres of public address as would permit the study of a multiplicity of speakers, speeches, audiences, and occasions. For the student who

would move in this direction, at least four approaches would seem to be available: the period study; the regional, or regional-period study; the case study, or more properly, the collection of case studies confined to a specific theme and time; and the movement study, concerned with the survey of public address, in historical movements. Of the four approaches listed, the one last mentioned has received perhaps the least attention. As with the other approaches, various questions concerning critical method and objective will confront the student who undertakes the rhetorical study of a movement. This paper undertakes to set forth some questions and suggest some answers.

## I

A first question which may confront the student: *what should be the point of focus in the movement study?*

Let us say that an historical movement has occurred when, at some time in the past: 1. men have become dissatisfied with some aspect of their environment; 2. they desire change—social, economic, political, religious, intellectual, or otherwise—and desiring change, they make efforts to alter their environment; 3. eventually, their efforts result in some degree of success or failure; the desired change is, or is not, effected; and we may say that the historical movement has come to its termination.

As students of rhetoric our concern is obviously with those efforts which attempt to effectuate change, not through the forces of wealth or arms, but through the force of persuasion. In the term

Mr. Griffin (Ph.D., Cornell, 1950) is Assistant Professor of Speech and English at Washington University, St. Louis.

<sup>1</sup> Specifically, by Herbert A. Wichelns in "The Study of Public Address," a paper read at the 1946 conference of the Speech Association of America.

*historical movement*, then, *movement* is for us the significant word; and in particular, that part of the connotative baggage of the word which implies change, conveys the quality of dynamism. For as the historical movement, looked upon as a sustained process of social inference, is dynamic, and has its beginning, its progression, and its termination, so the rhetorical component of the movement is dynamic, and has its inception, its development, and its consummation. The student's task is to isolate the rhetorical movement within the matrix of the historical movement: the rhetorical movement is the focus of his study. It is to be isolated, analyzed, evaluated, and described, so that he can say, for the particular historical movement which he investigates: this was the pattern of public discussion, the configuration of discourse, the physiognomy of persuasion, peculiar to the movement.

## II

A second question relates to scope: *what kind of movement should the student select for study, and how much of the movement should he study?*

The qualitative answer may be given briefly: 1. any movement, whether predominantly social, political, economic, religious, or intellectual; 2. any movement, whether present opinion considers it to have been successful or not. As students of persuasion, interested not so much in the accomplished change of opinion as in the attempt to effectuate change, we should find the rhetorical structure of the lost cause as meaningful as that of the cause victorious.

As for the quantitative answer, although movement studies are in their rudimentary stage, the practice followed in the biographical studies might well be reversed. That is, let the student take not the "biggest," but the briefest his-

torical movement he can find. Let him take a brief movement, as long as it is a movement with adequate rhetorical remains such as he, a single investigator, can encompass with scholarly accuracy and completeness. The first movements surveyed should above all be brief, in order that the survey may be undertaken by the single scholar. For the single scholar is more likely to achieve the synoptic view essential to the effective isolation, analysis, and evaluation of the rhetorical pattern of the movement.

When studies of a number of briefer movements have been completed, when the rhetorical structures peculiar to them have been identified, researchers may then be in a better position to cope with the methodological problems involved in the segmental study, the type of study which must of necessity prevail in the survey of massive movements, such as the antislavery and the temperance movements, which might defy the labors of the single scholar.

## III

A third question: *how should the student go about the business of isolating and analyzing the rhetorical movement?*

Let us say that two broad classes of rhetorical movements may be distinguished: 1. *pro* movements, in which the rhetorical attempt is to arouse public opinion to the creation or acceptance of an institution or idea; and, 2. *anti* movements, in which the rhetorical attempt is to arouse public opinion to the destruction or rejection of an existing institution or idea.

Let us say that within each movement two classes of rhetoricians may be distinguished: 1. aggressor orators and journalists who attempt, in the *pro* movement, to establish, and in the *anti*

movement, to destroy; and, 2. defendant rhetoricians who attempt, in the *pro* movement, to resist reform, and in the *anti* movement, to defend institutions.

Let us say, further, that within each movement, three phases of development may be noted: 1. *a period of inception*, a time when the roots of a pre-existing sentiment, nourished by interested rhetoricians, begin to flower into public notice, or when some striking event occurs which immediately creates a host of aggressor rhetoricians and is itself sufficient to initiate the movement; 2. *a period of rhetorical crisis*, a time when one of the opposing groups of rhetoricians (perhaps through the forsaking of trite or ineffective appeals, the initiation of new arguments, the employment of additional channels of propagation, or merely through the flooding of existing channels with a moving tide of discourse) succeeds in irrevocably disturbing that balance between the groups which had existed in the mind of the collective audience; and 3. *a period of consummation*, a time when the great proportion of aggressor rhetoricians abandon their efforts, either because they are convinced that opinion has been satisfactorily developed and the cause won, or because they are convinced that perseverance is useless, or merely because they meet the press of new interests.

The foregoing assumptions may serve to establish a working hypothesis, an hypothesis, to be sure, which future studies will undoubtedly serve to emend. Such studies may indicate, for example, that during the course of most historical movements, aggressor and defendant rhetoricians are likely to be presented with the problem of establishing the credibility of "seceders"—recusants who, deserting the opposition, stand as potentially invaluable sources of testimony. Again, such studies may demonstrate

that the group which would assure itself of victory must necessarily generate a flood of persuasive argument and appeal, and employ all, or nearly all, of the available channels of propagation; that, paradoxically, this necessary multiplicity of discourse, amplified beyond a perhaps indefinable optimum, will inevitably exasperate the public, lead to a loss of favorable opinion and, possibly, to ultimate defeat; and that the central problem of the rhetoricians of any cause, therefore, is to move the public to the desired action before the point of alienation is reached and reaction develops.

Some such generalized pattern as the one suggested, at any rate, may prove useful to the student when (his reading in the appropriate historical background completed, his reading in secondary works devoted to the movement itself concluded) he begins to read in the mass of discourse, and so to cope with the problem of isolating the rhetorical movement. The reading in the discourse should be chronological, proceeding from the period of inception to the period of consummation; and the reading should also be analytical. Thus, as he reads, the student will note the crystallization of fundamental issues, the successive emergence of argument, appeal, counter-argument and counter-appeal, and the sanctions invoked by rhetoricians of both sides; he will note, by a process of imaginative re-living in the age, by an analysis of consequences, the persuasive techniques which were effective and those which were ineffective; and he will note a time, very likely, when invention runs dry, when both aggressor and defendant rhetoricians tend to repeat their stock of argument and appeal. He will naturally note, during the period of inception, the emergence of a group of aggressor rhetoricians and a group of defendant rhetoricians; and he will note,

as the movement progresses, the gradual swelling of their ranks. He will be concerned with the discourse of both writers and speakers; with those who invented and those who echoed; with lecturers, pulpit, political, legislative, academic, and forensic orators, with editors, journalists, novelists, dramatists, and poets. He will also note the development and employment of media of discourse. Assuming the movement selected occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century, for example, he will find the opposing groups using some or all of such channels of propagation as books, pamphlets, broadsides, tracts, almanacs, newspapers, and periodicals, the pulpit, the lecture platform, the political rostrum, the stump, and the stage. He may note the development of organizations designed to facilitate the dissemination of argument, such as the lecture bureau, the committee of correspondence, and the political party. Finally, as he reads, the student will note the increasing circulation and the ultimate extent of the appeal; the development of audiences; and as the movement spreads, the geographical and social stratification of these audiences.

#### IV

A fourth question: *what rhetorical criteria should the student use in evaluating the public address of the movement?*

A first and obvious principle is that the critic must judge the effectiveness of the discourse, individual as well as collective acts of utterance, in terms of the ends projected by the speakers and writers. He will not need to be cautioned against the error of assuming a necessary identity between ends publicly announced and those privately maintained.

A second, and derivative, principle is that the critic must judge the discourse in terms of the theories of rhetoric and

public opinion indigenous to the times. This principle means that the critic will operate within the climate of theory of rhetoric and public opinion in which the speakers and writers he judges were reared, and in which they practiced; in other words, that he will measure practice in terms of the theories available, not to himself, but to the speakers and writers whom he judges. The principle means that the student of an early nineteenth-century movement will ground his judgments in the theories of Blair and Campbell; that the critic of a movement occurring within the last thirty years, on the other hand, will operate within the theoretical atmosphere created by latter-day rhetoricians, that he will acknowledge the presence of the propagandist, and the various devices of propaganda, in the theoretical atmosphere of the times. The principle demonstrates, one might add, that a need exists for further background studies in the development of theories of rhetoric and public opinion, and in the history of the teaching of rhetoric as well—studies such as those completed by Guthrie, Utterback, and Perrin; and a need for a body of period and regional-period studies which will give us specific demonstrations of the integration of theory and practice.

#### V

A fifth question: *how should the student go about the process of synthesis involved in reporting the movement?*

The general method of presenting the material, I believe, should be that of the literary historian rather than that of the statistician. That is, we should strive for movement studies which will preserve the idiom in which the movement was actually expressed. The movement, then, will not be completely atomized; rather it will be so presented as to convey the quality of dynamism, the

sense of action, chronologically; and even chapters essentially topical will be chronological in development.

The inherent difficulty arising from the necessity for the researcher to treat speakers, speeches, and audiences analytically, while at the same time he endeavors to present the movement synthetically, in a broad, chronological manner, may be resolved by a method of turning the movement on a spit, as it were, by piercing it now from one angle, now from another, as the movement spirals to its consummation. Thus, by centering on a significant series of debates, or a convention, or a political rally, of 1830; by centering on an important editorial, pamphlet, or book of 1831; by centering on an effective drama, satire, or sermon of 1832, he may accomplish the business of pushing the movement forward, and of piercing it from many angles. By threading the careers of selected speakers through the course of his study, the writer will achieve a sense of unity. In short, he will make use of the techniques of the case study and of the biographical study.

Obviously the writer will reinforce and enliven the study with ample quotation from the discourse; he will make full use of memoirs, letters, and other contemporary documents to give the study flesh and blood.

It is equally obvious that the introductory chapters of the study will be devoted to backgrounds—to the historical background and the rhetorical background of the movement; that the body of the study will be devoted to description, analysis, and criticism of the inception, development, and consummation phases of the rhetorical movement; that the final chapters will serve to reset the rhetorical movement in the matrix of the historical movement, the historical movement itself in the times; and that it will summarize the rhetorical pattern

peculiar to the movement and present other pertinent conclusions.

## VI

The reply to questions concerning primary objective in any particular movement study should now be apparent: essentially, the student's goal is to *discover*, in a wide sense of the term, the rhetorical pattern inherent in the movement selected for investigation.

But as the historical movement becomes a discrete field for research in public address, as studies employing the movement approach accumulate, certain broader results may become manifest. From the identification of a number of rhetorical patterns, we may discover the various configurations of public discussion, whether rhetorical patterns repeat themselves when like movements occur in the intervals of time, whether a consistent set of forms may be said to exist. We may learn something more about orators—even about the great orators—whom we may come to see from a new perspective, since they rarely speak except within the framework of a movement; and we may come to a more acute appreciation of the significance of the historically insignificant speaker, the minor orator who, we may find, is often the true fountainhead of the moving flood of ideas and words. By seeing numbers of men in an act and atmosphere of discourse, we may indeed produce fresh transcripts of particular moments of the past. We may come closer to discovering the degree of validity in our fundamental assumption: that rhetoric has had and does have a vital function as a shaping agent in human affairs. And finally, we may arrive at generalizations useful to those anticipated writers of the comprehensive histories of public address—histories that might well be conceived in terms of movements rather than of individuals.

